WHAT'S IN A NAME? LANGUAGE, IMAGE, AND URBAN IDENTITY IN EARLY MODERN PERTH

Author(s): Margo Todd

Source: *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History*, 2005, Vol. 85 (2005), pp. 379-395

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24013142

WHAT'S IN A NAME? LANGUAGE, IMAGE, AND URBAN IDENTITY IN EARLY MODERN PERTH

MARGO TODD

Abstract

The corporate identity of the Scottish royal burgh of Perth was in the Middle Ages tied closely to its patron saint, John the Baptist. After the reformation of 1559-60 had abolished all veneration of saints, this identification did not disappear. The town was still called Sanctjhonstoun, the festivals of the Baptist continued to serve as calendar dates, and the St. John's bell continued to call parishioners to the kirk. Even more striking, images of the Baptist survived — on the bells, in the hammermen's silver marks, and in the town seal. Protestant usage would eventually shift the meanings associated with the Baptist, but the saint would never disappear entirely from the town's constructed identity.

1. *Introduction*

On the eve of the Protestant reformation, the Scottish royal burgh of Perth was a community identified by its patron saint, John the Baptist.[1] Its single parish church of St. John was devoted to the Baptist, and of its more than forty altars, fifteen were dedicated to him.[2] People prayed for his intercession and protection in time of trouble. The eve of his birth date, 24 June, had been celebrated time out of mind with "Sanctjhonsmes benfeiers." Images of him abounded, including those in the church, icons processed around the

---

[1] I am grateful to Mark Hall of the Perth Museum and Art Gallery for many helpful conversations about the material culture of sixteenth-century Perth, to Steven Connelly of the AK Bell Library's county archives for unearthing post-reformation town seals, and to both for helping to arrange digital reproduction. Fig. 1 is courtesy of the St. John's kirk session, Perth, the photo by R.W. Clouson; figs. 2-4 and 6 are courtesy of the Perth Museum and Art Gallery, Perth and Kinross Council; fig. 5 by permission of the Perth and Kinross Council.

[2] *Chronicle of Perth*, ed. James Maidment (Edinburgh, 1831), p. 59, taking into account the annexation to each other of multiple altars to the same saint, which also accounts for his count of 70 altars in the church. It is, in fact, a fair indicator of numbers of bequests for altars. Richard Fawcett, *Scottish Medieval Churches* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 55; A. Simpson and S. Stevenson, *Historic Perth: The Archaeological Implications of Development* (Glasgow, 1982), p. 11.

town on his feast days, and those on the seal that hung on the town's official documents. And he gave his name to the town: people were as likely to refer to the town as "Sanctjhonstoun" as they were to speak of "Perth."

In May of 1559, another John made his appearance in the town. The Protestant reformer John Knox ascended the pulpit of St. John's church and preached a thundering denunciation of "monuments to idolatry." The sermon inspired a certain segment of the population — very numerous, by all accounts, but by no means inclusive — to launch an iconoclastic rampage that ended in the utter destruction of the Whitefriars, Greyfriars, Carthusian, and Blackfriars houses; the altars and images in the parish church; and many of the chapels (chantries) scattered in and around the burgh. The town proceeded to rally support for the Lords of the Congregation. Its minister, the converted friar John Row, was among the most earnest of the reformers. Beginning the next year, the kirk and eventually parliament abolished all veneration of saints, saints' days and their festivities, icons and images, altars and chapels.[3] *Saint* John the Baptist was no more. Or so we are told.

The problem should be obvious. For centuries, the people of the burgh had looked to their martyr/patron for protection and, indeed, for their corporate identity. They had spent a small fortune in the middle of the fifteenth century rebuilding his church, and right up to the reformation constructing and decorating the altars within it. The newest altar to the Baptist had been endowed as recently as 1556.[4] However supportive the town's leaders were of Protestantism (and they were), the elimination of the saints, including the town's own, presented an immediate challenge. The people of Sanctjhonstoun now had to re-construct their own corporate image, their urban identity, apart from all the images and associations that had sustained it

---

[3] *First Book of Discipline*, ed. James K. Cameron (Edinburgh, 1972), p. 88; *Booke of the Universall Kirk: Acts and Proceedings of the General Assemblies of the Kirk of Scotland 1560-1618* (hereafter cited as *BUK*), (Edinburgh, 1839), 1: 90, 332, 334, 339, and 388; 2: 407, 410; *The Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland*, 4 vols. to 1625 (Edinburgh, 1814-16), 3: 542; Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven, 2002), Ch. 4; M. Stavert, *Perth* (Perth, 1991), pp. 32-33.

[4] In the will of Sir Wimon Young: *Chronicle of Perth* (see above, n. 2), p. 59. Richard Fawcett, *The Archaeological History of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 74, 184, and 189-93; W.H. Findlay, *Heritage of Perth* (Perth, 1996), p. 2.

for so long. They had to do so, in fact, apart from what was in popular usage their very name.[5]

This would, eventually, happen. What is most interesting is the *process* by which it was achieved. The received version, fueled by Knox's own account, depicts a virtually overnight transformation of the burgh from Catholic to Reformed. What the evidence indicates instead is that the shift took some time, and that fundamental to the process was an underpinning of continuity with the medieval past — in word, in sound, in measurement of time, and even in imagery. Communal identity is not constructed overnight; nor is it *re*constructed in a flash, even with Knox's oratory to inspire and edify. The very naming of the town tells the tale.

2. *Name and identity*

Long after Saint John had been reduced by Protestants to just John, the town of Perth in actual practice kept its traditional name, "Sanctjhonstoun." The Lords of the Congregation themselves talked of "the queen's holding forward to Sanct Johnestoun," or of meetings "in any place near Sanct Joniston." The earl of Argyll wrote in 1559 that the "noble men of the congregation" were appointed "for convention in Sanct Johnistowne;" eleven years later, Glenorchy wrote to his lady about meeting with lord Ruthven "if you might apprehend him in Santjohnstoun."[6]

A hundred years later, general Monck and his commanders would write about the Cromwellian citadel and about troop movements in

---

[5] For theoretical treatments of the relationships among geographic locations, material objects, corporate memory, language, and a sense of communal identity, this paper has drawn from Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London, 1985); Claudia Strauss, *Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning* (Cambridge, 1997); Fredrik Barth, 'Boundaries and connections,' in *Signifying Identities: Anthropological perspectives on boundaries and contested values*, ed. A. Cohen (London, 2000), pp. 17-36; and Barth's seminal work, *Ethnic Groups & Boundaries* (London, 1969), particularly important for discussion of the contingencies of communal identity in time, a theme that recurs in *Balinese Worlds* (Chicago, 1993).

[6] *Campbell Letters 1559-1583*, ed. Jane Dawson (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 76 (James MacGill of Nether Rankeillour to Glenorchy, 13 January 1564); p. 141 (William Douglas of Lochleven to Glenorchy, 20 August 1566); p. 63 (Archibald Campbell and Lord James Stewart to Glenorchy, 29 August 1559); p. 189 (Glenorchy to Lady Glenorchy, 16 August 1570).

and around Santjohnstoun.[7] General Assemblies from the 1560s referred to the town's clergy as ministers "at St Johnstoun."[8] And of course Perth's own citizens continued to use the term. Among many instances, in 1638, Henry Adamson in a truly dreadful poem called *The Muses Threnodie* not only repeatedly called his native town by the name of its saint, he also described a trumpet call used in battle:

> Courage to give was mightilie then blown
> Saint Johnstons huntsup, since most famous known
> By all musitians, when they sweetlie sing
> With heavenly voice, and well concording string
> That heavenlie harmonie,. . .
> Methink I heare "God save the Companie"

— as God did, in the particular conflict that Adamson was recounting. The "St Johnstons huntsup" did the trick.[9] Examples could easily be multiplied. Clearly, Perth's popular name, Sanctjhonstoun, did not disappear at the reformation, or even after the "long reformation."[10]

The same theme emerges when we look at how the people of post-reformation Perth measured time. Even in the kirk session minutes, where one would hardly expect mentions of the saints, fines are to be paid, or marriages are to be accomplished, by "Sanctjhonsmes," and parishioners reported actions taken "about Sanct Johns Day last."[11] Some entries specify "St Jhonisday in harvest" — the feast day of the Baptist's martyrdom (29 August) rather than

---

[7] C.H. Firth, ed., *Scotland and the Protectorate* (Edinburgh, 1899), p. 113 (Monck to Cromwell, 30 May 1654); p. 149 (Monck to Cromwell, July 1654, narrating events from 9 June); p. 259 (Monck to Cromwell, 27 March 1655), among many other examples; F.D. Dow, *Cromwellian Scotland 1651-1660* (Edinburgh, 1979), pp. 65, 124-5, 131, and 142.

[8] *BUK* 1: 66, for instance (1565).

[9] Henry Adamson, *The Muses Threnodie, [. . .] Containing varietie of pleasant Poetical descriptions, morall instructions, historicall narrations, and divine observations, with the most remarkable antiquities of Scotland, especially at Perth* (Edinburgh, 1638), pp. 51, 59, and 60, quote at 57. At this point in the poem, he is describing the victory of the Protestant townspeople and the Lords of the Congregation against Mary's forces. Other examples of the name abound — e.g., Patrick Blair's reports (1589), Lambeth Palace Library MS 3471, fol. 39v.

[10] For the cultural and social/psychological implications of place-names, see K. Basso and S. Feld, eds., *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe, 1996), pp. 91-135, 230-57; Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); A. Buttimer and D. Seamon, eds., *The Human Experience of Space and Place* (New York, 1980).

[11] National Archives of Scotland (hereafter cited as NAS), MSS CH2/521/1, e.g. pp. 40 (1579), 49, 50, and 109; 521/6, fol. 118v (1617); 521/7, p. 25.

his birth (24 June).[12] Of course, John the Baptist's day is not the only banished festival day used to measure time in these and other legal records of the Protestant town. Fines were also made due at "Mertinsmes" or "Candilmes," "Fastronsevin," and "Whitsun."[13]

Historians read these dates so often in legal and academic records of all sorts that it is easy to pass over them as "mere custom," practice so long used that we assume contemporaries would not have thought twice about them. We tend to assume them secularized. Here, however, the cognitive psychologists may have something to teach us about unconscious associations of language with meaning, memory, and emotion.[14] Rather than taking the survival of this traditional dating for granted, consider its implications. Even more remarkable than the saints' days here are the moveable feasts. The kirk had included with its abolition of saints days a radical erasing of the whole liturgical calendar — including Christmas and Easter. But how is one to date Whitsun or Ascension with no Easter? (For that matter, "Pasche" itself was often specified as a deadline.) Clearly the reformers, including John Row as a member of the Perth kirk session, were under no illusions that people no longer knew when Easter and its attendant fast and feast days occurred. Nearly all of these deadlines involved payment of fines or rents, and where money was involved, we can be quite sure that the session would not set a

[12] NAS, MS CH2/521/1, pp. 156, 183, and 186 (1582, 1583).

[13] For a sampling, among many examples, NAS, MSS CH2/521/1, pp. 155-56, 159 (Lambes); p. 158 (Michaelmas); pp. 162, 165-66, and 171 (Martinmas); p. 164 (Hallowmas); pp. 166-69, 170-71 (Andersmas); pp. 138, 174 (Candlemas); pp. 100-101, 137, and 173 (Fastronseven); pp. 159-60 (Lent); pp. 175-76 (Palm Sunday); p. 139 (Pasche); pp. 100, 171, 175-76, and 179 (Whitsun). Secular law courts and the universities maintained this tradition as well, of course. But it is not as if the church courts did not recognize an option: sometimes their deadline is 'Yule Day'; in other cases it is *vigesimo quinto decembris*.

[14] A. Ortony, G.L. Clore, and A. Collins, *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions* (Cambridge, 1988); A. Ortony, *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge, 1993); Robert Frank, *Passions Within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions* (New York, 1988). For an anthropologist's consideration of cognition and identity, see Martin Sökefeld, 'Debating the Self, Identity, and Culture in Anthropology,' *Current Anthropology* 40 (1999), 417-47. For an archaeologist's perspective, C. Renfrew, 'Towards a cognitive archaeology,' in *The Ancient Mind — Elements of Cognitive Archaeology*, ed. Renfrew and E.W. Zubrow (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 3-12; Renfrew, 'Mind and Matter: Cognitive Archaeology and External Symbolic Storage,' in *Cognition and Material Culture*, ed. Renfrew and C. Scarre (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 1-61; and A. Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 3-63.

date that people might get wrong. The language of confessions and depositions suggests, moreover, that the clerk was simply writing what people said: we are hearing popular usage when we read Agnes Fulton admitting "carnal deal" with James Patton, maltman, "first betuix Yule and Candilmes, and lykwayis with William Gray at St Jhoneis Day in harvest, and continually befoir."[15] People remembered not just the set holy days, but the shifting ones as well, long after their abolition. What associated memories remained with them? It is no wonder the reformed kirk continued to declare fasts in the season that used to be Lent, and to offer communion at Easter time.[16]

The feast day of John the Baptist's birth, conveniently coinciding with Midsummer, remained an ever-memorable date, its festivities merging with Midsummer's lighting of bonfires. So the session minutes records in May of 1586 that Jhone Justice "shall fulfill the injunctions of the kirk eftir bonfeir tyme," and the next month David Anderson was permitted to delay his repentance until "after bonfere time."[17] Later the session would make a concerted effort to abolish the festivities, probably worried less about adoration of the saint than about the "lewd and lascivious" dancing to pipes and drums that went on around the fires late at night. But through the seventies, the festival itself was sufficiently accepted by the elders that they used it for dating.[18]

3. *Sound and memory*

The measurement of time in post-reformation Perth was in another way permeated by a continuing identification with John the Baptist. The passing of the hours was marked by the ringing of bells. Perth had, in addition to kirk and tollbooth knocks (clocks), an enviable collection of bells. Some were used simply to mark hours, others to call to church, still others to make announcements. There were hand bells and hung bells. Among the most venerable were three cast in the early sixteenth century and devoted to John the Baptist. One was called the Agnus Dei bell; another, the common bell; and the

---

[15] NAS, MS CH2/521/1, p. 183 (27 May 1583).

[16] Todd, *Culture* (see above, n. 3), pp. 86-89, 93-94.

[17] NAS, MS CH2/521/1, pp. 242, 245.

[18] Margo Todd, 'Profane Pastimes and the Reformed Community: The Persistence of Popular Festivities in Early Modern Scotland,' *Journal of British Studies* 39 (2000), 123-56.

third, a very fine bourdon bell still hanging in the carillon, was St. John's bell, cast in 1506 and highly decorated.

Bells are expensive, and in any case very much harder to destroy than paintings and stained glass. They naturally remained in the kirk after 1559 despite their associations. If there were any doubt about what those associations were, though, a glance at the bells themselves tells us what would have been known by everybody in the sixteenth-century burgh. They had all been cast with text. A visitation of the kirk made at the town's request in 1653 scrambled up into the steeple to read the bells and records in its detailed description, "the preaching bell [the bourdon], on the upper side, [. . .] *Joannes Baptista Vocar Ego Vox Clamantis in deserto*" and "the common bell, [. . .] *Joannes Baptisti Vocar, [. . .] Ego vox clamantis in deserto/ Parata viam Domini.*" The common bell was destroyed in 1804, but we have a fragmentary rubbing done just before that showing the Baptist's name. A smaller sixteenth-century bell now hanging on a frame on the floor of the kirk can be read by any visitor, *exce Agnuc dei.* These are just the sixteenth-century Baptist bells; the 1653 visitors also listed the the fourteenth-century "Ave Maria" bell, with its Annunciation text, and the curfew bell, with its "letters old character [. . .] *pro nobis clamare.*"[19]

The bells spoke for the people; their saints interceded for them. At least that would have been the understanding when they were installed. Is it credible that parishioners hearing them sound in 1570 or '80 would somehow have lost this meaning altogether? Sounds, like smells and images and places, have deep-seated associations[20] —

[19] The Agnus Dei bell, a Scottish casting, hangs on a frame in the kirk along with fourteen others. The bourdon bell hangs in a lowside cast-iron frame in the tower for full circle ringing by a rope hanging below. The 'Report of a Visitation,' 21 March 1653, is in R.S. Fittis, *Ecclesiastical Annals of Perth* ([Perth], 1885), p. 44. Members of the Perth Literary and Antiquarian Society, established in 1794, produced a rubbing of part of the inscription of the common bell, now preserved in the Perth Museum. R.W.M. Clouston, 'The bells of Perthshire: St. John's Kirk, Perth,' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 124 (1994), 525-42, has a useful discussion of the bells. He remarks (p. 525) that Perth has more bells surviving from before the reformation than any other British church. He tentatively identifies the Agnus Dei bell with the "little skellit bell," p. 538; it is referred to in NAS, MS CH2/521/1, p. 22.

[20] Anthony Cohen, 'A sense of time, a sense of place,' in *Belonging: Identity and Social Organization in British Rural Cultures* (Manchester, 1982), pp. 21-49; Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, *Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning* (Cambridge, 1977), passim.

associations not nearly so easily destroyed by Knox's railing as were images on wood or glass or stone. When the bourdon bell rang in the 1570s or '80s, or in the seventeenth century, the common memory would still have recognized it as John the Baptist's bell, the sound carrying still the presence of the town's patron saint in ways hardly calculable by modern sensibilities. If it is difficult for us to sort out the meanings carried by the sound nearly five centuries ago, we ought not therefore ignore them.[21]

4. *Image and power*

What does it mean that St. John's name survived in the town still called by it? To get at the answer to that question, we need first to ask whether the saint survived Knox's wrath in any other form than text and calendar and sound. The power of the saint in the Middle Ages resided partly in invocation of his name, but perhaps more in regarding and venerating his image. And images, we are told, disappeared after 1559.

But another look at the bells gives the lie to that old, Protestant presumption. The bourdon bell, the one used to call people to sermons after the reformation, was cast with not only the Baptist's name and his crying in the wilderness, but also with his full-length image, lamb in hand (fig. 1). So was the 1520 "common bell." What must the thoroughly Protestant 1653 visitors have thought when they found on that bell "stamps of John the Baptist on each side" and "in midst Christ riding on an ass colt and people crying?" Even the little Agnus Dei bell has on a shield above *exce* a picture of the lamb to which Baptist pointed in representation of Christ (fig. 2). Enough of the people who paid to have these bells cast were still living in the post-reformation to quash any notion that contemporaries were unaware of the images on the bells; and periodic orders by the kirk session for bell maintenance and repair would have reminded those who ascended the steeple.[22] If the bells, like the town, retained their names, the reminder would hardly have been necessary. The kirk session

---

[21] A recurring theme, though substituting geographic and cultural distance for time, in the work of anthropologists associated with James Fernandez: e.g., *Irony in Action: Anthropology, practice, and the moral imagination*, ed. Fernandez and Mary Taylor (Chicago, 2001).

[22] E.g., NAS, MSS CH2/521/1, p. 22; CH2/521/2, fol. 28v; CH2/521/3, p. 220.

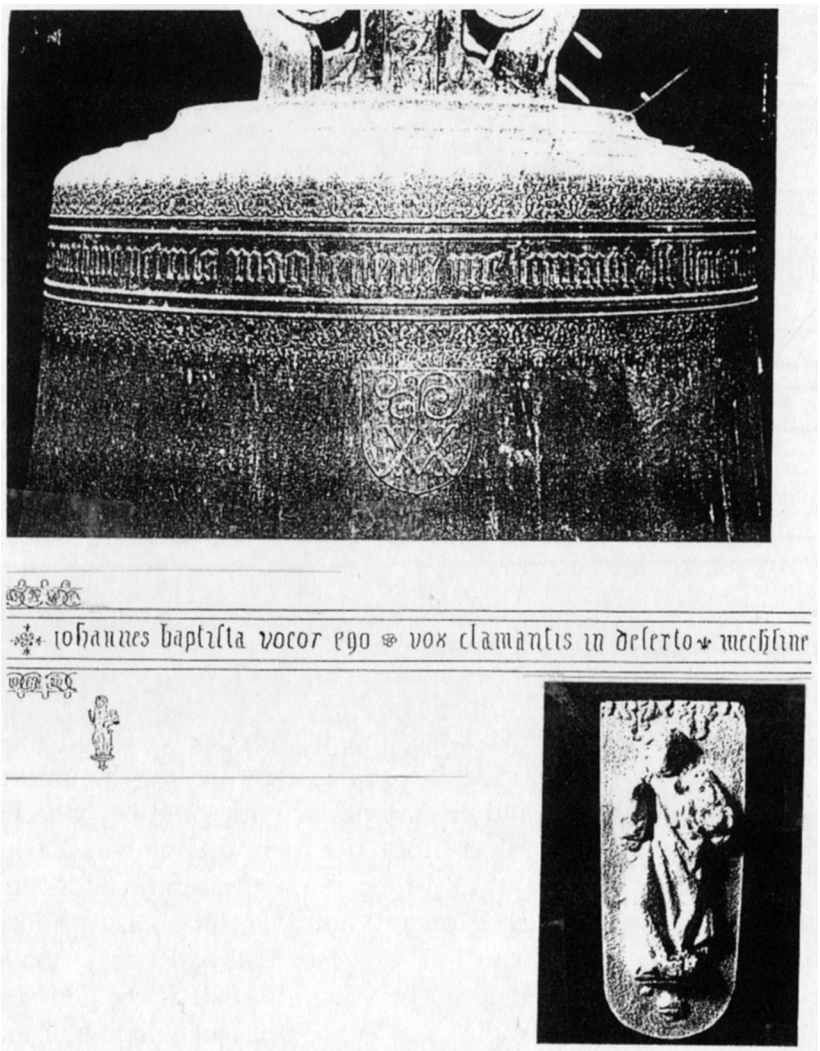

Fig. 1. St. John's Bell (bourdon) crown, with detail of cast statuette (St. John's Kirk, Perth), 1506.

may have called St. John's bell the "preaching bell," but can we assume that the new name caught on straightaway amongst the citizenry?

In any case, the images on the bells were not lone survivals; moreover, new images of the Baptist and his associated Agnus Dei were made. The town's medieval silver mark is a case in point. The agnus dei that accompanied images of the Baptist — kneeling and carrying

Fig. 2. Agnus Dei bell: rubbing of inscription and images (Perth Museum and Art Gallery; bell in St. John's Kirk, Perth).

either a cross or a staff and flag (often with the cross of another saint, Andrew) — remained the mark used by the hammermen throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and beyond. There is little surviving Perth silver from our period, but what there is shows the stamp consistently. It appears on the seventeenth-century communion cup made by Robert Gairdiner for nearby Kinnoull parish (fig. 3). It shows again on the silver ball of Rattray, made in the 1610s by Thomas Ramsay (fig. 4). (The ball is the oldest surviving Scottish sporting trophy: it was the prize in a handball match among teams from Rattray and its neighbouring parishes.)[23]

What did the mark signify, for the hammerman who made it or the people who handled it, at communion or on the playing fields? Most obviously, it marked the maker as part of the community of Perth: it declared his urban identity. It announced his competence

[23] Robin Rodger and Fiona Slattery, *Perth Silver: A Guide to Perth Siler and Silversmiths* (Perth, 2001), pp. 21, 33. Gairdiner was deacon of the Perth hammermen 1669-71, 1673-74, 1676-77 and made communion cups for Coupar Angus and Innerpeffray as well as Kinnoull parish. Robin Rodger, 'The Silver Ball of Rattray: a unique Scottish sporting trophy,' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 122 (1992), 403-11.

Fig. 3. Kinnoull parish communion cup with detail of Perth hammermen's stamp, later seventeenth century (Perth Museum and Art Gallery).

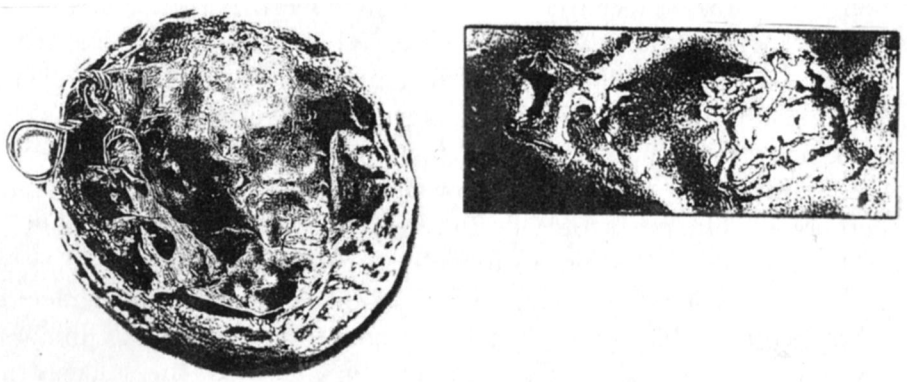

Fig. 4. Silver ball of Rattray with detail of Perth hammermen's stamp, ca. 1612-14 (Perth Museum and Art Gallery).

in the craft, since license to use it was limited to freeman masters of the guild. But at its origins, it was an image to be adored, an icon for veneration. Like all images of saints and their accouterments, it summoned the faithful to pious exercise, to call on the saint's power. It was, crudely put, a talisman of some potency. Did this association disappear abruptly in 1559? The superstitions of sportsmen are legendary; how many of the handball players would have touched the lamb on the winners' ball without some reverence for the luck it may have brought — not to mention the protection it may have offered from injury in what was by all accounts an appallingly violent game? These silver balls were apparently played with, rather than just serving as prizes, in some games. Possession of the ball would under those circumstances be all the more coveted for the power of the Baptist that may have attended it.[24]

St. John's lamb appeared in other post-reformation guises as well. It was the emblem on the town's badge for the poor. We read in the kirk session minutes for 1589, "seeing that this town is overlaid with strong, idle, and uncouth beggars," strangers taking alms away from the town's own poor, beggars are henceforth not to be received without "the holy Lamb, the town's mark and token, on their breasts." Again, the lamb is emblematic of the town itself, of urban identity. But that identity is expressed, as it had been for centuries, as an identification with the burgh's patron saint, the one who had first pointed out Christ as the lamb to be slain for sin. Here an association with Christian charity is superimposed on the other layers of spiritual meaning for those who observed the sign. Of those who wore it, how many touched it with a memory of traditional reverence, now sitting uneasily with its signal of poverty and the shame of begging? How many identified their own plight with the poverty of the saint in the wilderness? How many sought his protection and intercession? The pre-reformation was still, after all, in living memory.

There are doubtless more survivals of the image than we will ever know. The religious houses and the altars in the kirk certainly suffered at the hands of Knox's mob, but we know that some altar images survived, as they did in England, hidden away by the guildsmen who had paid for them so dearly (and in some cases, so recently).

---

[24] Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things* (see above, n. 14), pp. 6-63; Barth, 'Boundaries' (see above, n. 5), pp. 17-20, the latter discussing the "merging of self and object through time" and its creation of a relationship — one as simple as possession, in his example, or as complex as a talisman.

The altarpiece of St. Bartholomew, commissioned by the glovers' guild not long before the reformation, escaped the iconoclastic mob and was secreted away in one of the guild's rental properties, and later moved to the hall built for the incorporation's meetings. There he stood for generations to come, surrounded by the flaying tools of his gruesome martyrdom — the tools used by the skinners in the guild. His image reinforced the guildsmen's corporate identity — with each other, but also with their own protector.[25] Is it credible that an image or two from some of John the Baptist's many altars would not also have been saved, waiting for some disciple of Eamon Duffy to unearth and photograph them? The market cross also survived, though it was not so lucky when Cromwell came to town a century later. Only the undecorated shaft now remains of it (in Fingask), but clearly it had decorative stonework attached, along with the top hacked off by English troops in 1651. We can only wonder how the Baptist might there have been portrayed.

These questions should be construed as a call for further research, and for greater cooperation between historians on the one hand, and archaeologists and museum curators on the other. But enough of speculation. We get back to firmer ground with a final example. Official documents of the burgh were sealed before the reformation with a remarkable icon. It shows St. Johnstown's patron in the process of losing his head, kneeling before his executioner, with Salome waiting off to the side, a charger in her hands to receive the severed head of her mother's nemesis. On the obverse, John is glorified, standing at the center framed by architectural excess, with lesser saints off to either side (fig. 5). This is clearly an image designed to excite adoration. Used as the town seal, it firmly identifies the burgh as a corpus with the favour and protection of its martyred and glorified patron saint.

In the town museum, there is displayed a picture of the image, and beneath it the caption explains to visitors that the seal would have been discarded at the reformation. Not so. A few blocks away, in the archives of the town, in boxes of writs from the second half of the sixteenth century, fragments of the seal survive, the largest on

[25] For English examples, Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven, 1992). The St. Bartholomew example is discussed by David McRoberts, 'A Sixteenth Century Picture of Saint Bartholomew from Perth,' *Innes Review* 20 (1959), 281-6 and plate at p. 279, and by Mark Hall, 'Cultural Interaction in the Medieval Burgh of Perth, Scotland, 1200-1600,' in G. Helmig, B. Scholkman, and M. Untermann, eds., *Medieval Europe Basel 2002, Pre-printed Papers Volume I* (Hertingen, 2002).

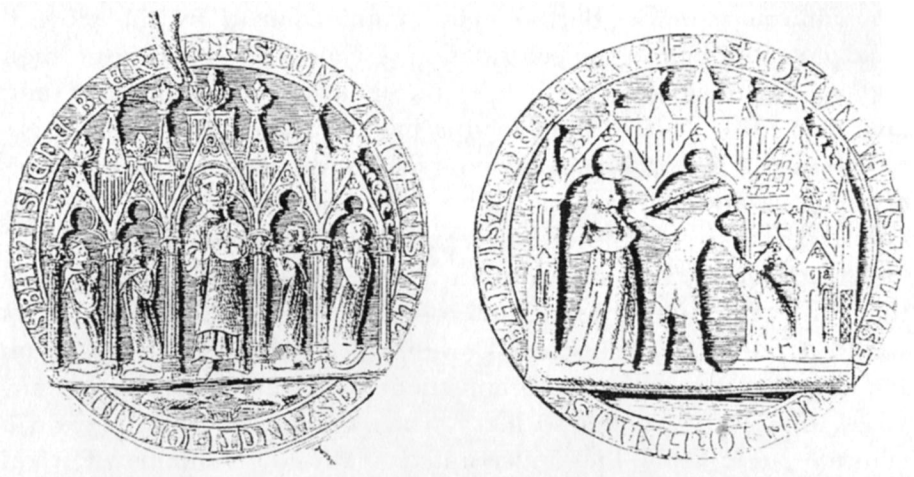

Fig. 5. Medieval seal of the burgh of Perth; fragment on document post-1563, AK Bell Library, Perth, MSS B59/40/17.

a writ of 1563. The document itself is a gift to the town of rents from property in the Castlegable by a burgess named Gilbert Blair. The money is to be used, he directs, *ad reparationem et sustentationem pontis de Tay*. This is obviously an act of civic charity. Yet its execution is ensured by a seal fundamentally religious in its import, the emblem of a town that remains St. John's town. Another writ of 1570 displays a variant burgh seal that, while simpler, is no less traditional: the center is indecipherable, but the legend around the edge reads, *S+IOHANIS*.[26] And in the later seventeenth century, a new seal without the Baptist, displaying instead the double-headed eagle still on Perth's arms, retains at least the lamb with its saltire banner in the shield on the eagle's breast (fig. 6).[27]

5. *The meaning of the name*

Exactly how we ought to measure the degree of such survivals — of name, image, and the memory associated with them — remains a problem. How we go about assessing their meaning is an ongoing and increasingly interdisciplinary debate. The theoretical work

[26] Bell Library, Perth, MSS B59/40/17/1 and B59/40/17/6. Henry Laing, *Ancient Scottish Seals* (Edinburgh, 1866), pp. 221-22.

[27] These arms were first recorded with the Lord Lyon in 1673. The motto was apparently a favourite of William the Silent, Prince of Orange.

Fig. 6. Later seventeenth-century seal of the burgh of Perth.

that has come to us from cultural anthropologists, sociologists working on communal identity, and psychologists dealing with memory can help. What is striking about this sort of theory, though, is the self-evident nature of so much of it. It just stands to reason that images thought holy for centuries are going to retain a special status for some time after their holiness is denied by clerical authority. That is why cultural revolutions are so difficult, and take as long as they do. The challenge for historians is to acknowledge the power of the unconceptualized, much less untheorized, custom that gave meaning to the lives of early modern people.

This is all the more true when that custom served not only to bond corporate identity, but to address external threats to the corpus. Early modern Perth was beset by an unremitting round of devastating plague outbreaks, winter storms, eclipses that by all accounts terrified, destructive earthquakes and even more destructive floods, and serious

dearth.[28] Until 1560, the saints had been there to intercede on behalf of the burgh, to offer some protection and hope in time of fear and need. It was all very well to address natural disasters after 1560 with extra sermons and prayers, fasting and corporate humiliation. But it would not hurt at the same time to touch an image of the Agnus Dei or to listen carefully for the Baptist's voice in his bell.[29]

None of this should be taken to mean that the reformation in Perth was unsuccessful, or even particularly slow. It was not. The heavy dosage of vigorous Protestant preaching, the steady round of catechizing and examination, and the intense and remarkably pervasive discipline exercised by the burgh's session saw to it.[30] Indeed, they would establish for the burgh a new, Protestant identity. The reformation would, eventually, change some names. St. John's Bell would come to be called the "preaching bell," as we have seen in the 1653 report; the Agnus Dei bell would be called simply the "little skellit bell"[31] in the session minutes, and at some point the aural associations of its ring with the Baptist must have faded.

The reformation also transformed the meanings of old names. That poem by Henry Adamson includes an encomium of the town's first Protestant martyrs — four men and a woman executed at cardinal Beaton's order in 1544 for, among other things, objecting to saint-worship. The heretics were bound with ropes, which Adamson glorified with the name, "Saint Johnstown's ribands." He thus used the traditional moniker to bind his Protestant heroes both to their biblical progenitor, the burgh's patron saint, and to Perth's new Reformed identity. The poem goes on to tell us that the Lords of

---

[28] John Mercer, *The Chronicle of Perth*, ed. James Maidment (Edinburgh, 1831), pp. 3, 5, 7, 9, 10-12, 14-18, 22-24, 26, and 34 list the recurring disasters of the mid-sixteenth through mid-seventeenth centuries.

[29] The kirk session was quite transparent in listing its reasons for calling a season of fasting and humiliation: in January of 1635, for instance, they feared the "plague of frost and snow [. . .] threatening destruction both of man and beast if it be not prevented by unfeigned repentance for our sins" (NAS, MS CH2/521/8/1, fol. 258). Philip Benedict has recently tried to attribute the religious conservatism of rural Europe during the reformation to "the tenacious attachment that country dwellers everywhere in Europe felt to those Catholic rituals that promised protection against the vagaries of nature"; *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, 2002), p. 40. This is surely a spurious argument, ignoring both urban dependence on its agricultural hinterlands for food, and the quite direct threat to towns life posed by floods, quakes, epidemics, and other natural disasters.

[30] Todd, *Culture* (see above, n. 3), pp. 24-83, 127-82.

[31] NAS, MS CH2/521/1, p. 22 (6 October 1578).

the Congregation entered the town "with coards about their necks" in memory of the martyrs who, like the Baptist, "readie were for Christ to do or die/ [. . .] Thus our Saint Johnstons riband took the name/ Whereof we have no reason to think shame."[32] St. Johnstown had a renewed collection of martyrs, and their emblems, to replace its lost saints. Tradition and the Baptist's name and power thus survived, but in Protestant guise.

What we learn from the long survival of the town name and the persistence of the saint's image in this context is that the transformation of Perth into a thoroughly Reformed town was a more complicated process than we have hitherto thought. The authorities turn out to be a bit more flexible, adaptable, even syncretistic than we knew.[33] Who were the Protestant burgh's authorities, after all? They were the hammermen who sat in session meetings Monday and stamped the agnus dei on Tuesday. They were the baxter bailies who searched out sinners in November and baked Yule cakes in December.[34] They were the merchant magistrates who punished "superstition" one day and on the next sealed their documents with emblems of the Baptist martyred and glorified. They were the elders who investigated suspected papists with alacrity, but arranged their children's marriages by St. Johns Day and even, in some cases, lit bonfires on the day.[35] They were, in short, laymen like their charges, citizens of the Baptist's town, identified as members of an urban corpus that would always in some sense be Sanctjhonstoun.

---

[32] Adamson, *Muses Threnodie* (see above, n. 9), pp. 51-60, quotes from 51, 55, 60.

[33] On this point, Barth's work on the dynamic nature of identity and its tactical management in changing circumstances is particularly applicable (see above, n. 5). He describes adjustment of identity (or boundaries, in his most recent work) as a reconciliation of cognitive categories and lived experience. Traditional markers do not disappear in the process; instead, their continuity, with adjusted meanings attached, is essential to the reconciliation process. He and Cohen both understand the negotiability of boundaries defining communal identity, but also the importance of elements that are regarded by people as non-negotiable. Some elements must remain stable during times of change in order to avoid disorientation and its attendant psychosocial disorder: Cohen, *Symbolic Construction* (see above, n. 5) and both authors in *Signifying Identities* (see above, n. 5), Introduction, pp. 17-38. The Perth elders were in accord with Zwingli's advice on the gradual destruction of remaining images and elimination of customary ritual — that those principles "on which faith hinges should be brought out without delay; but the things that militate against it need to be demolished with skill, lest they do harm in their downfall and bury the little that has already been built up", *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. S.M. Jackson (Durham, NC, 1981), pp. 92-93, 321.

[34] NAS, MS CH2/521/2, fols. 59, 114v.

[35] Todd, *Culture* (see above, n. 3), pp. 192-194.